

Lately, I have been looking at some of the writings of the economist Burnham P. Beckwith (1904-1989). Nowadays he is pretty much a forgotten figure and even in his own time, I do not think that he was particularly well known. In terms of his outlook in philosophy, politics and economics: in philosophy he was an avowed logical positivist. For him, both metaphysics and theology were literally nonsensical because metaphysical and theological statements can be neither confirmed nor disconfirmed on the basis of empirical observations. Likewise, he thought the same of ethics. Burnham expounded on this in his book *Religion, Philosophy, and Science: An Introduction to Logical Positivism* ([https://archive.org/details/religionphilosop0000unse\\_a5v9](https://archive.org/details/religionphilosop0000unse_a5v9)). Burnham, while an economist, had been a philosophy major when he was an undergraduate at Stanford (and Beckwith said that he had continued to study philosophy while working on his doctorate in economics at USC and doing a research fellowship in psychology at Columbia under Edward Thorndike). In many of his other writings, including his writings on economics, he would often refer back to this book. Besides being a logical positivist, Burnham was a self-described Fabian socialist in his politics, while as an economist, he was very much a neoclassical economist. Like some other neoclassical economists such as Oskar Lange, the young Abba Lerner, and even the young Ronald Coase, Beckwith saw neoclassical economics as perfectly compatible with socialism. While otherwise an admirer of Karl Marx, he rejected Marx's labor theory of value as such, and for him, it was neoclassical welfare economics that could provide the theoretical basis for the management of a socialist economy.

Another of his books that I have been looking at is his *The Economic Theory of a Socialist Economy*, which was published in 1949. (That book is available online at <https://archive.org/details/economictheoryof0000beck>). As I said before, Beckwith was an economist by trade. He was an avowed Fabian socialist and not a Marxist, with an interest in working out in detail how a socialist economy ought to work, using the principles of neoclassical economics. In the first chapter, he briefly reviewed the literature that existed back then on the economics of socialism, covering what Oskar Lange had to say on the subject, as well as what other socialist economists such as Abba Lerner and Maurice Dobb. He asserted that there was a paucity of Marxist writing on the subject, which he attributed in large part to Marx's opposition to "writing recipes for the cook-shops of the future." Beckwith held that Marxists had carried this reluctance too far. He also maintained that Soviet Marxists had written little on the subject (This was before the work of Leonid Kantorovich was known in the West and before the Soviet school of mathematical economics had come into its own). Beckwith was also of the opinion that Marxian economics provided a poor basis for a socialist economics. Like Lange, he was of the view that it was neoclassical economics that provided the basis for the rational administration of a socialist economy. And in this book, he attempted to show just how that could be done. Not unlike Lange, Beckwith was very much concerned with neoclassical welfare economics. For him, neoclassical welfare economics was closely linked with utilitarianism in ethics. For Beckwith, price and/or output is ideal when price equals marginal cost through an analysis of individual economic problems. He saw this notion as the most important contribution to neoclassical economics after the marginalist revolution. And he wrote another book *Marginal - Cost Price - Output Control: A Critical History and Restatement of the Theory*. As we shall see, Beckwith held that one of the principle advantages of a socialist economy over capitalism would

be in a socialist economy it would be possible to set all prices to equal marginal costs, thereby optimizing the allocations of resources. Under a capitalist economy, it is not always possible to set prices equal to marginal costs because very often that would mean setting prices below what would be possible for companies to make a profit. Hence, in this way capitalism was less efficient than the kind of socialism that Beckwith advocated.

I have found at least one Marxist review of Beckwith's book. In 1950, Alfred Evenitsky wrote a review of both *On the Economic Theory of Socialism* by Oskar Lange, Fred M. Taylor, ed. Benjamin Lippincott, and Beckwith's book in the Spring 1950 issue of *Science & Society* (<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40400001>). Evenitsky was not overly impressed with Beckwith's book. He took umbrage over Beckwith's rejection of the labor theory of value (without pointing out that Lange did this too). He also objected to what he saw as Beckwith's Fourierist tendencies and his concern with overpopulation, which Evenitsky saw as having eugenicist implications that good socialists ought not to embrace. In fact, I have found that in some of his other writings, Beckwith was far from shy about avowing support for certain eugenic policies.

Beckwith's book was also reviewed in the Trotskyist journal, *New International*, November–December 1950, by Duncan Farley, "Marginal Utility" Socialism. (<https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/ni/vol16/no06/farley.html>). There Farley, who was apparently underwhelmed, wrote:

"Needless to say, the economic theory of a socialist economy is still to be written. And when it is, it will not draw very heavily on Mr. Beckwith's effusion"

His basic beef with the book was:

"The interesting thing about the book is not that it found a publisher given its title, or that it carries nonsensical marginal utility theory to absurd lengths, but that it is written by an admitted Social Democrat (author of *The Modern Case for Socialism* under the pseudonym of John Putnam) who applies marginal utility theory to socialism in the interests of "individual freedom in a Socialist state" and winds up erecting a system that fairly blossoms with bureaucratism. It is therefore not accidental that Beckwith joins other marginal utility "socialists," such as Oscar Lange, in exhibiting marked Stalinoid and Stalinist traits."

Farley found Beckwith's reliance marginalist economic analysis to be objectionable since the marginalists had rejected the labor theory of value. I would note, however, that Beckwith's reliance on marginalism was consistent with his professing to be a Fabian socialist. Most of the early Fabians, including G.B. Shaw and the Webbs were early embracers of marginalist economics, and they too had rejected the labor theory of value. And Farley, himself drew a comparison between Beckwith and the Polish economist Oskar Lange, a self-described Marxist who had embraced marginalist economic analysis, which he saw as being compatible with Marxism. In any case, as Farley saw things, while Beckwith may have been sincere in seeking

to build a democratic socialism, his theories, if put into practice, were likely to lead to the building of a bureaucratic collectivism not unlike what existed in the Soviet Union under Stalin.

When the book was reissued in a 1974 revised edition under the title *Liberal Socialism*, it was reviewed by Ivan Maksimovic – “A Neoclassical Approach to the Economic Theory of a Socialist Economy.” The reviewer noted Beckwith had framed his theory within the context of the socialist calculation debates that had been initiated by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. And in the tradition of Oskar Lange and Abba Lerner, Beckwith had responded to the arguments of von Mises and Hayek by using neoclassical economic theory to show how a socialist economy could be made to work. Unlike the Trotskyist reviewer, Duncan Farley, Maksimovic did not see Beckwith as adopting a Stalinoid approach to socialism but rather, he saw Beckwith as taking a stance was more than a little reminiscent of guild socialism, insomuch as Beckwith was seen as emphasizing making the control of socialist firms democratic with top management being selected by democratic processes.

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In any case, Beckwith considered himself to be a radical economist and social scientist, working in the tradition of such radical social scientists like Bentham, Comte, Marx, and Engels. Beckwith outlined this in a short piece, *A Comment on "The Eunuch Speaks,"* that appeared in the June 1960 issue of *Monthly Review*, a Marxist magazine. In one passage, he reflected:

----- June 1960 *Monthly Review*

The world has long been moving steadily to the Left, and this movement is speeding up. The most crucial problems in social science are all problems of how to move Left. And the greatest social theorists of our century are certain to be those who have stated the most successful radical solutions to these problems.

This hypothesis can easily be supported by a review of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The social scientists of that century who are now best remembered and most influential-Comte, Bentham, Marx, Engels, to name only a few-were all radicals. They dealt radically with critical social problems, and hence they still interest us. By contrast, the professors who discussed only the minor social problems of the day, or who suggested minor reforms to solve major problems, have been largely forgotten.

The purpose of all science is effective control over events. Social science is a science of rational social control over social events. Hence, the progress of social science inevitably increases demand for social control over social events, and the greatest social scientists are those who formulate the most novel and comprehensive, i.e., radical, programs of effective social control. Social science leads from laissez-[aire, through increasing interventionism, to comprehensive social coordination-in other words to socialism and other forms of national and international coordination.

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Some noteworthy observations concerning Beckwith. He seems to have anticipated the application of neoclassical economic analysis to areas outside the usual province of economics, in other words, to broad areas of social science that were always considered to be outside the sphere of economics - The sort of thing that Gary Becker would become noted for developing. Thus in his philosophy book *Religion, Philosophy, and Science: An Introduction to Logical positivism*, Beckwith, on p. 241 wrote

“Bertrand Russell once asserted that ethics alone can deal with cases in which what one man wants conflicts with what another man wants. This is a gross error. Most such problems are economic problems which economists alone can solve. And many non-economic social problems also can be solved by economic analysis.”

Likewise, Beckwith seems to have anticipated some of the approaches that would be taken by the law and economics school. From that same page:

“Economists have developed a method of analysis which enables them to measure how much different men have been benefited or injured by a given social act. They measure, or allow individuals to measure, these effects in a common denominator, money, add up the resulting valuations, and subtract the total value of costs from that of benefits. The social policy which yields the largest net positive difference is the most beneficial.

“We shall call such calculation economic analysis because it has been developed by economists for the solution of economic problems. However, it is also suitable for the solution of non-economic social problems. In fact, it is the only method which can be used to solve them scientifically. Political scientists, sociologists, historians, and other non-economic social scientists have never created any alternative method of scientifically evaluating social policies and never will. They can be unscientific and try to consider the unmeasurable moral consequences of social policies, and they can improve traditional methods of economic analysis, but they cannot evaluate political and social policies scientifically without measuring and comparing their effects upon different individuals in some common denominator, i.e., in money. Thus economic analysis is far more important than economists have claimed it to be.”

And in the introduction to the second edition of this book which he had reissued under the title of *Liberal socialism: the Pure Welfare Economics of a Liberal Socialist Economy* (<https://archive.org/details/liberalsocialism0000beck/page/n5/mode/2up?q=Finally%2C+we+stat+e+a+complete>), he argued:

“Finally, we state a complete theory of welfare or prescriptive economics without using any moral or ethical principles. For instance, we argue that personal incomes should be far less unequal because this would increase average real incomes, not because grossly unequal incomes are immoral. Our hypothesis is verifiable, the latter is not. ”

On p. 26-27 of that book, Beckwith stated:

“Although Bentham rejected both religious ethics and non-utilitarian philosophic ethics, he called his new theory of conduct a theory of ethics. This mistake induced many of his followers and critics to conclude that there is a non-scientific element in his theory of conduct. It has seemed to excuse those modern welfare economists who claim that ethics is essential to welfare economics. We believe that Bentham’s utilitarian theory of conduct can easily be interpreted or restated as a purely scientific theory of conduct. Moreover, the great classical and neoclassical economists, who based their economic theory on utilitarianism, so interpreted the theory. They made little if any use of non-scientific ethics, the only ethics that should be called ethics.<sup>2</sup>”

This view of welfare economics would seem to be consistent with the stance that he taken in *In Religion, Philosophy, and Science*, where he had pushed the logical positivist view of ethics as being meaningless to its most extreme version.

**Beckwith on free will and determinism.** In *Religion, Philosophy, and Science*, he rejected belief in free will as being inconsistent with determinism which he regarded as a necessary presupposition of scientific inquiry. Furthermore, he regarded the concept of free will as being meaningless because it could neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed by scientific means.

Here is one of his statements on the issue:

“In this same book, Eddington argued that since we are as yet unable to explain scientifically the behavior of atoms and electrons, we may conclude that they are not subject to law at all but in fact have a sort of “free will” of their own. He also supported the inconsistent conclusion that when atoms are in a human body their action may be governed by a different “free will,” ie., that of the spirit in this body.”

“We have already noted that so-called scientific laws do not govern phenomena. The alternatives suggested by Eddington, namely that atoms have free will or are controlled by human will are both nonsensical because no possible method of testing them can be conceived.”

“The fact that personal decisions are at least partly determined by observable causes such as alcohol, head injuries, education, and parental behavior is now so obvious that even priests and philosophers concede it. Most of them still maintain, nevertheless, that the individual is either free to over-rule such influences by an act of free will or that his will creates new forces which compensate for the observable ones. In other words, they claim that, regardless of all observable factors, the individual is free to act as he pleases.”

And Beckwith argued that we should not confuse fatalism with determinism.

“Critics of human determinism often identify it with fatalism. This is plausible because fatalism can be defined as synonymous with determinism, but it is also misleading because fatalism has other and more common senses which directly conflict with our definition of determinism. For instance, we say a man is a fatalist if he thinks it is impossible for men to influence their fate by acting wisely. In sharp contrast, the determinist knows that if men do the (scientifically) right

thing, then as an inevitable result their fate will be improved. For him science serves chiefly to help men determine their own fate. This obvious difference between popular fatalism and scientific determinism is frequently overlooked by critics of determinism.”

Likewise, he thought that much of then contemporary psychology still fell outside the realm of legitimate science. Hence, the following statement from him:

“Many psychologists are still working on the senseless problem of whether the mind is spiritual or physical, which can be stated in various ways, all equally senseless. Some of them take seriously meaningless problems as to the nature of conscience, the origin of consciousness, how acts of free will are related to bodily movements, how instinct differs from reason, etc.”

In some of his other writings, Beckwith expressed his sympathy for behaviorist psychology,

**Beckwith’s rebuttal to Barrows Dunham** – “Barrows Dunham has asserted that the result of holding “moral judgments to be capable of no proof,” i.e. meaning- less, is that “one cannot rationally choose (i.e., choose on the basis of argument) between death camps and liberation” (Man Against Myth, p. 253). This argument ignores the fact that moral judgments differ radically from scientific judgments. It is plausible only because it is ambiguous. When he says “rationally choose,” does he mean choose morally or scientifically? We have already noted that philosophy, and therefore philosophic ethics, is “rational,” ie. based upon rational intuition and rational deduction. That is why its conclusions are false or meaningless. On the other hand, scientific reasoning is also rational in a different sense, and scientific judgments of, i.e., rational choices between, such things as “death camps and liberation” are not only possible but commonplace.

When rephrased unambiguously, Dunham’s argument claims that the result of holding moral judgments to be unprovable is that one should not choose morally between alternative means, but this conclusion does not mean we cannot choose scientifically. Many arguments against positivism turn out to be irrelevant when thus restated in an unambiguous way.”

**Beckwith on metaethics** He was a staunch noncognitivist and emotivist in regards to ethics.

“Obedience to a rule of conduct may be expedient for the individual or for some group which includes him. When moralists distinguish between moral and expedient conduct they sometimes seem to identify moral conduct with conduct which is expedient for some group, usually the tribe or nation. The term moral seems meaningful and different from expedient when so used, but actually it means expedient-to- a-group. This is a scientific term, for scientists can determine by observation what is expedient to a group.

"While the criteria for determining ethical conduct are quite different from those for determining expedient con- duct, ethical conduct may also be expedient. Many rules of expedient conduct which developed before ethical theories were created were taken over and endorsed by priests and philosophers." “

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**Beckwith on Auguste Comte** – “In his famous theory of the three stages of human thought, August Comte (1798-1857) said that in every field of study ideas go through three stages of evolution; (1) the theological, (2) the metaphysical, and (3) the positively scientific. He developed this brilliant theory before Darwin had published his theory of biological evolution and before Marx had announced his theory of social evolution. While Comte’s doctrine cannot be applied to all studies, for instance to logic and mathematics, and requires minor qualifications before being applied to some other fields, it is still the best available theory of intellectual evolution. ;”

“Like Comte, we believe that all truth-claims can be divided into three classes and that it is vitally important to understand how these classes differ. But we shall name and define our three classes a little differently. Comte called his classes theology, metaphysics, and positive science. We prefer the names religion, philosophy, and science. We define religion as ideas or statements obtained by revelation, or deduced from such statements; philosophy as statements believed to be obviously rational or deduced from such statements; and science as statements verified by observation.

“Our decision to retain the name positivism and our laudatory reference to Comte should not persuade the reader that we are orthodox Comtean positivists or that we honor Comte above all other 19th century advocates of scientific method. Comte was opposed to democratic government, labor unions, votes for women, socialism, compulsory public education, and other progressive things. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill were, we believe, more able and well-rounded positivistic thinkers than Comte, and Marx developed a much more useful theory of social evolution. On the other hand, Comte was probably the first to state the general theory of positivism, and he ably publicized it and the theory of the three stages of intellectual evolution.”

Beckwith expressed his agreement with Comte’s Law of Three Stages. He agreed with the French philosopher that human thought proceeds through Comte’s three stages: theological, metaphysical, and the positive. Contrary to Beckwith, I do not think that his proposal to replace Comte’s terminology (i.e. theological, metaphysical, and positive) with a new terminology (religion, philosophy, and science) really clarified things. Indeed, I think that Beckwith’s proposed terminology was likely to confuse people rather than enlighten them. Religion, after all, need not be theological in character. Comte himself had proposed a positivist religion after all. Beckwith seems to equate philosophy in general with metaphysics. But he admits that most logical positivists were not in agreement with him on that point. Most logical positivists saw themselves as doing philosophy. For Beckwith, the positivists in his view were actually doing science instead of philosophy. That position was actually a departure from the orthodox logical

positivism that Beckwith was defending. His position was actually closer to Quine's. In the case of Quine, that position rested on Quine's rejection of the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions, which had been a basic premise of orthodox logical positivism. Quine can be thought of as having been a heterodox logical positivist.

In his book, **Ideas about the future : a history of futurism, 1794-1982**, Beckwith included a chapter on Auguste Comte, and provided further discussion of Comte's positivism, while reiterating what he had said earlier concerning what he thought would be a clearer terminology than the kind that Comte had used. There, he wrote:

"For modern readers, Comte's arguments are often obscured by the use of old terms to denote new and often radically different ideas. For instance, he used the term philosophy to denote the general principles of science, the term morals to denote the principles of applied social science, the term spiritual to mean intellectual, and the term religion to denote scientific humanism. In most cases, I have translated such terms into their more accurate modern equivalents. Thus any critic could easily question my conclusions by citing quotations from Comte which use his misleading terminology."

"Comte's law of the three stages clearly implied many more specific predictions, including: (1) the decline of beliefs in a vast number of religious myths such as those of a universal flood, Noah and his ark, creationism, the resurrection of Christ, etc., (2) the decline of belief in all metaphysical theories--including materialism, spiritualism, and absolute ethical and aesthetic principles, (3) the growing application of scientific methods to problems of personal and social behavior, and, as a result, (4) the creation of new sciences such as behaviorist psychology and sociology."

"In spite of his emphasis on intellectual progress, Comte once claimed that "material progress is the source of all progress" (PP, II, 147). He was aware of the long previous history of both social and economic progress, and predicted that such progress would continue indefinitely. He specifically mentioned the accumulation of capital as a vital part of material progress (p. 141), and expected it to continue as indeed it has."

Beckwith's favorable discussion of Comte sets him apart from most of the logical positivists, some of whom professed to despise Comte. In fact that was one reason so many of them eventually chose to drop the label of positivist as a self-description in favor of the term, logical empiricist. For most logical positivists, certainly those who were members of the Vienna Circle, Ernst Mach was their preferred patron saint not Auguste Comte. I suspect that one reason why they felt an aversion to Comte was because of his efforts to create a new Positivist religion. And since most of the logical positivists were leftists, indeed socialists, the fact that the older Auguste Comte took so many conservative political positions made him less than attractive in their eyes. Yet, I think that Beckwith was correct to cite Comte's Law of Three Stages as one of Comte's most significant intellectual achievements, one that ought to be embraced by logical positivists and other likeminded souls.



“During the next century or two the most important general trends in religious opinion among believers will be from conservative to liberal religious views, not from theism to atheism. Religious people will continue to abandon the less plausible and satisfying dogmas of religion, such as those concerning hell, the devil, angels, the virgin birth, divorce, birth control, miracles, etc. They will pray and attend church less and less often. Atheism and agnosticism will continue to grow, especially among university graduates, but will not soon become dominant in countries where religion is free. In general the average Protestant will be as liberal theologically in 2300 as Unitarians are today.”

Returning to his earlier book, **Religion, philosophy, and science; an introduction to logical positivism**, Beckwith had an interesting brief discussion concerning the philosophy of science

Thus Beckwith wrote:

“In his book, *The Growth of Scientific Ideas* (1954), Wm. P. D. Wightman asserts that Einstein rendered “the concept of force redundant” by developing his general theory of relativity. But the concept of impersonal physical force is meaningless as well as redundant. And this more important conclusion is the result of semantic analysis, and could have been arrived at independently of Einstein. In fact, it probably was arrived at before Einstein. The followers of Descartes, for instance, criticized Newton’s theory of gravitation over 200 years ago because it was usually stated in terms of force or attraction, which they regarded as “occult” rather than scientific terms.”

“In our criticism of referentless scientific nouns, like force and utility, we have gone far beyond the orthodox logical positivist position. Most contemporary positivists are willing to let scientists use any accepted scientific term. All that they insist upon is that scientists begin with observation and end up with conclusions for which some method of verification can be conceived. This is certainly the fundamental thesis of positivism, but we believe that the application of the stricter semantic rules we have supported would also help greatly to end philosophic reasoning by scientists.”

. . .

“We have been illustrating the thesis that religion and philosophy have harmed science, especially physics, by showing that many common scientific terms are meaningless and/or have philosophic implications. We shall now illustrate the same basic thesis by offering examples of religious and philosophic thinking on supposedly scientific problems by a few famous scientists. We begin with Alfred Einstein because he is generally considered the greatest modern scientist, not because he is unusually guilty of unscientific reasoning. Indeed, his greatest achievement, the general theory of relativity is due to his recognition of the philosophic elements in previous supposedly scientific reasoning about time and space. Unfortunately, however, Einstein often appears unable to detect philosophic reasoning and distinguish it from scientific thinking in physics.”

“In *The Evolution of Physics* (1938), for instance, Einstein and Infeld claim that the progress of science has refuted the philosophic theory that the world is mechanical (pp. 57-9). But, if a

theory can be proven or disproven by scientific research, it is a scientific theory, not a philosophic theory. In fact, it is quite meaningless to say that the world is mechanical or non-mechanical, for adjectives become senseless when applied to everything. Hence, scientists cannot prove or disprove that the universe is mechanical.”

“Einstein and Infeld believe in “the inner harmony of our world” (p. 313) but do not explain how this can be observed. The noun harmony is nonsensical because it has no agreed referent or image. The adjective inner suggests the meaningless philosophic distinction between outer appearance and inner reality. The adjective harmonious is also meaningless unless there are unharmonious things from which harmonious things can be distinguished. But if both unharmonious and harmonious things are observed, how can we discover which determines the “inner” world? Such questions are philosophic rather than scientific. Every scientist ought to be able to distinguish between the two and ought to denounce the former as nonsensical.”

“In *The Universe* of Dr. Einstein (1948), Lincoln Barnett asserts that Einstein has helped to solve the problem of whether scientists are in touch with “reality,” presumably the reality behind appearance that philosophers talk about. This is a typical philosophic problem. It is impossible to conceive of any method of verifying any answer to it.”

I have noticed a seeming contradiction in Beckwith’s discussion of the philosophy of science. Thus Beckwith writes:

“We can see no reason why scientists need call upon outsiders, the philosophers, to supply them with definitions, methods, or presuppositions. Rather we are convinced that scientists are better qualified to define their terms, select and improve their methods, and state their assumptions than any outsiders. To be meaningful and useful, a scientific hypothesis must be verifiable. To create such hypotheses, the scientist must use terms which denote observable things. The selection of such terms and the formulation of such hypotheses is a vital part of the scientist’s work. None of it should be delegated to outsiders.”

And yet, as we have seen, Beckwith, himself professionally an economist, went out of his way to criticize physicists, including the great Albert Einstein for not adequately defining their terms and assumptions so as to ensure that their hypotheses would be empirically testable and verifiable. One might say that Beckwith was acting like a philosopher.

Brushing that to the side for the moment, it should be noted that kind of critique that Beckwith made of Einstein’s use of referentless scientific nouns is reminiscent of Ernst Mach’s critique of the use of concepts like force in classical mechanics. That critique had made quite an impression on the young Einstein, but Beckwith found the mature Einstein guilty of much the same thing too.

“Professional class, growth of, 78, 88, 192-93, 196, 205 Born in Carthage, Missouri, in 1904, and raised largely in Pasadena, California, Burnham Putnam Beckwith was graduated from Stanford University with a B.A. in Philosophy in 1926. He spent the next two years at the

Harvard Business School, and, after three more years of full-time graduate study, received a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Southern California in 1932. He held a post-doctoral research-training assistantship under Dr. Edward L. Thorndike at Teachers' College, Columbia University, from 1935 to 1937. He also taught economics at the University of Kansas, Queens College (NYC), and the University of Georgia before going to work for the War Production Board (D.C.) in 1941. From 1945 to 1948 he worked for the War Department in France (Biarritz American University) and in Germany (OMGUS, Berlin)."

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Beckwith on E. A. Burtt - from p. 93 of *Religion, philosophy, and science; an introduction to logical positivism*

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“In 1924 E. A. Burtt published an influential book, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, in which he argued that science requires metaphysical assumptions. He devoted most of this book to a revealing discussion of the metaphysical theories of the great pioneer scientists, from Copernicus to Newton, and then concluded illogically that, since these men accepted some metaphysical ideas, science requires metaphysical assumptions. It would be equally logical to argue that since all of these men were superstitious, in some cases extremely so, modern science must be based upon superstition. It is obviously impossible to prove that a metaphysical theory is a necessary presupposition of science since all such theories are meaningless.”

Compare and contrast with what Burtt had said in his 1924 book:

“To begin with, there is no escape from metaphysics, that is, from the final implications of any proposition or set of propositions. The only way to avoid becoming a metaphysician is to say nothing. This can be illustrated by analysing any statement you please; suppose we take the central position of positivism itself as an example. This can perhaps be fairly stated in some such form as the following: It is possible to acquire truths about things without presupposing any theory of their ultimate nature; or, more simply, it is possible to have a correct knowledge of the part without knowing the nature of”

“or this reason there is an exceedingly subtle and insidious danger in positivism. If you cannot avoid metaphysics, what kind of metaphysics are you likely to cherish when you sturdily suppose yourself to be free from the abomination? Of course it goes without saying that in this case your metaphysics will be held uncritically because it is unconscious; moreover, it will be passed on to others far more readily than your other notions inasmuch as it will be propagated by insinuation rather than by direct argument. That a serious student of Newton fails to see that his master had a most important metaphysic, is an exceedingly interesting testimony to the pervading influence, throughout modern thought, of the Newtonian first philosophy.”

Interestingly enough, some of the leading logical positivists seem to have held views that were not unlike those of Burtt. Hans Reichenbach, for instance, drew a distinction between what he called the “context of discovery” from what he called the “context of justification.” The former referred to ideas, including metaphysical or even theological ones, which might have inspired scientists to make the kinds of discoveries that they made. The latter referred to the methods for

validating scientific hypotheses which was the main concern of logical positivist philosophy of science. Similarly, Philipp Frank in his writings on the philosophy of science emphasized the role that metaphysical ideas played. And he emphasized the extent to which such ideas might support particular social and political agenda, noting that such agenda were often reasons for scientists embracing such ideas. And Karl Popper, who was not a logical positivist as such, was inclined to emphasize the role that metaphysical ideas have played in inspiring the creation of scientific theories and hypotheses. Thus it seems to me that Burt had a point, certainly more of a point than Beckwith was willing to acknowledge and one that some of the other leading positivists were willing to concede at least in part.

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In a short piece in the June 1960 issue of **Monthly Review**, *A Comment on "The Eunuch Speaks"*, Beckwith laid out his views concerning the responsibilities of social scientists. There, he wrote:

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all described in *The Jazz Scene*, the largest book yet, in my opinion, on this large subject, for which Mr. Newton makes no undue claims. But where would we be without the release it has provided, alternative to blandness, deceit and hypocrisy, to the degeneration of song and "the real truth of life," offering itself so generously to the young and the young of heart in the great transformation that is going on?

### **A COMMENT ON "THE EUNUCH SPEAKS"**

BY BURNHAM P. BECKWITH

In a most interesting article, "The Eunuch Speaks," (*MR*, November 1959), Professor Martin Bronfenbrenner cogently discussed the pressures and penalties which strictly limit the expression of radical social theories by university social scientists. He also explained how some advanced social thinkers might work fruitfully under these oppressive conditions, and appealed to radical young intellectuals to make more efforts to do so. I should like to supplement his discussion.

A few years ago, *Fortune* published a study of a dozen of the most able younger American natural scientists and reported that they were distinguished, among other things, by an unusually keen desire to work on crucial problems, those whose successful solution leads to the most enduring fame. I believe the same is true of the ablest